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Boele van Hensbroek, P.

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## **Should Intercultural Philosophy take over from Anthropology in study of culture?<sup>1</sup>**

Pieter Boele van Hensbroek

Faculty of philosophy

University of Groningen

Criticism of Anthropology and self-criticism of the discipline are not new. In fact, since the exposure of its role in colonial rule and in fostering Eurocentric prejudice about so-called ‘primitive’ peoples, Anthropology has developed to be one of the most self-critical disciplines in the academia. However, the criticism that professor Wim van Binsbergen advances in his recently published book *Intercultural Encounters* goes beyond all this. Himself a distinguished anthropologist of religion, his fundamental criticism leads him to the conclusion to desert the discipline of Anthropology and shift to Intercultural Philosophy. Such a criticism deserves careful attention because if it holds, then it cannot remain without consequences for the intellectual landscape in the Human Sciences, as it would put Intercultural Philosophy central stage in academic concerns with culture. The present article investigates whether Anthropology can be repaired after van Binsbergen’s criticism. My angle of approach is narrower than van Binsbergen’s. I limit myself to considerations from the point of view of Philosophy of Science.

*Intercultural Encounters* is a captivating book. It recounts van Binsbergen’s personal intellectual development through a presentation of his own key publications over a period of thirty years. The original texts are enriched with his comments and analyses produced today. *Intercultural Encounters* thus reconstructs the story of van Binsbergen’s discovery of a range of internal contradictions in Anthropology. The book mixes the theoretical discussion of these methodological issues and Gordian knots of the discipline with the personal drama of living through these contradictions. And a drama it is, because both professional and personal integrity are at stake. The thirty years of intercultural encounters recounted in the book raise not just methodological or professional issues, but also political, moral and biographical ones. Finally, in van Binsbergen’s view, it raises the question of personal integrity as a person living in an intercultural world. Honesty and authenticity in constructing one’s own deepest convictions and relating with cultural others in an unprejudiced way requires a rejection of Anthropology and a radical conversion towards Intercultural Philosophy.

The various levels of the argument in *Intercultural Encounters* can be outlined as follows. A first level concerns epistemological and methodological questions related to Anthropology, especially anthropological fieldwork. Van Binsbergen discusses these with reference to the history of his own intellectual production and his own fieldwork experience. At a second level, the book addresses questions of the politics of knowledge and the justification of, what he calls, a “North-Atlantic” knowledge practice. The hegemonic position of North Atlantic knowledge traditions is itself an issue, but this obtains extra weight when these traditions address other parts of the globe. How does this North Atlantic knowledge relate to the self-interpretations produced elsewhere? What knowledge is produced when, for instance, an ethnographer fully participates in another form of life, and how is this knowledge affected when such experiences are reported in academic writing? How to decide which interpretations are more valuable? How even to

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<sup>1</sup> a later version of this article will be published in *QUEST, an African Journal of Philosophy*.

reach a situation where both are taken equally seriously? The politics of knowledge thus leads to a third level of questions relating to fairness, honesty towards fellow humans, and authenticity of oneself. Are the honest and open human relations in the fieldwork situation betrayed by having a second agenda of representing the cultural experience in a foreign paradigm? Can the anthropologist be true to her/himself when incisive cultural experiences, roles played, and friendships solidified are ignored after the fieldwork period in favour of interpretations fitting the regular scientific paradigm?

Van Binsbergen's argument is complicated because it addresses all three levels of the argument. His conclusion is that Anthropology is seriously problematic at all these levels, it is epistemologically naïve, has a knowledge-political bias towards the North-Atlantic, and leads to unfaithful attitudes to both one's fellow humans in the field work situation and to oneself. Nevertheless all these elements of criticism connect together into one line of reasoning which I will represent below. For van Binsbergen the train of dilemma's have an important biographical dimension as well, because he became himself a locally qualified healer in the Southern African tradition of Sangoma. As an anthropologist, such experienced as a Sangoma healer is respected, but the discipline expects finally a rendering of such fieldwork experiences in terms of regular anthropological theorizing. Here van Binsbergen protests, both for personal and for professional reasons. Why should he become unfaithful to Sangomahood, his fellow healers and himself, and why should the North-Atlantic paradigm of understanding automatically demand precedence?

The core of van Binsbergen's argument is an epistemological criticism of Ethnography. The enterprise of Ethnography is built upon gathering ethnographic data, where fieldwork is the instrument and ethnographic monographs and articles are the result. The idea of fieldwork is that the foreign context of meaning is captured by immersing oneself into the form of life concerned. Thus cultural phenomena can be understood from within the cultural context of meaning and can be experienced as they really are, in an 'emic' way, from within. Having gained understanding of cultural phenomena then the issue is to present the results carefully and honestly in academic writing.

Van Binsbergen points out that, despite all due attention to anthropological professionalism and unprejudiced attitudes, the idea of fieldwork is a case of naïve inductivism. First of all because of the assumption of gaining access to the cultural facts as they really are, second, because of the assumption that the framing of these findings in academic textual forms is not distorting. Anthropologists tend "to improvise their way when it comes to epistemological and methodological foundations". (497). If both the problems of access and of representation were given due attention, then we would have to move to different modes of intercultural knowledge production instead of Anthropology, he argues.

As for the problem of access, the empiricist claim ignores the constructivist aspect of empirical science and experience in general. There cannot be a complete shedding one's original mindset, linguistic conditioning and cultural attitudes. On top of that, by formulating the specific research questions and scope of one's study, choosing concepts and theories, and other study-specific arrangements the observer adds to the construction of the object of research. Even with a completely emic approach, including the continuous validation of the ethnographer's interpretations in day to day acting and communication of a community, one cannot claim to reach an unproblematic, untainted

understanding. We need to replace a classical objectivist model of knowledge acquisition, where the subject gains unproblematic access to the object, with a communicative model, where the people studied can 'speak back' and interpretations are questioned, confirmed or adjusted. In the words of van Binsbergen: "Ethnographers (...) can only claim credibility provided that, in their fieldwork and in the production of published texts, ample provision has been made to turn their ethnography into a form of 'communicative action'." (504)

As for the problem of the representation of findings in academic vocabulary, using scientific notions and following textual forms that are standard in the discipline, here too Anthropology has naïve assumptions, according to van Binsbergen. He describes this act of representation as a certain form of appropriation, of aggression, and of expressing power differences. Ethnography ignores these problems. Van Binsbergen argues that, in fact, Ethnography is not even neutral but is based upon a preliminary choice for North Atlantic worldviews. Where beliefs and interpretations under study differ from the North Atlantic worldview, there the last one remains unchallenged and the worldview under study needs to be explained in terms of what is considered sensible in the North Atlantic. For instance in the case of witchcraft, the standard idea of the non-existence of witches is not questioned, it is only the other side which comes under scrutiny; it is the witch-belief that needs to be explained from factors that are acceptable in the North Atlantic. Thus, the epistemological criticism immediate results in a knowledge-political argument, because if access and reporting are less than neutral, then of course questions arise as to whose biases and paradigms dominate the knowledge process. Van Binsbergen calls ethnography 'eurocentric' because it does not treat the collective representations of other cultures on a par with the North Atlantic ones. The representations that have to be explained, that are put into question, are always those of the society studied. Those of our own are not questioned, they are even taken as the criterion for identifying what needs to be explained in the foreign culture. The explanatory vocabulary is automatically that of the North Atlantic. Thereby, basic norms of openness and fairness in intercultural communication are breached, and the hegemonic position of North Atlantic paradigms is confirmed. The unreflective representation in academic texts is then a case of "subordinating objectification". 509'

Moral questions also derive immediately from this argument. The asymmetrical situation the participant observer is unfaithful to the communicative interaction and shared experiences within the community. The dishonesty is that the participations in the community and personal interactions are, finally, only instrumental. It is a practice of "joining them in the field and betraying them outside the field" (507). Finally, the persons in the host community are not taken seriously, social roles and friendships are betrayed and the full meaning in the local life is sacrificed to a rendering in academic formats. In addition, van Binsbergen maintains, the ethnographer is dishonest to him/herself. Authentic experiences of oneself may be ignored or denied. In the case of van Binsbergen's experience as a Sangoma healer this was a vital observation, because he considered it betrayal to his own authentic experiences and the Sangoma worldview to practice the expected professional distancing in order to fit this Sangoma truth into an acceptable ethnographic format.

I will here investigate van Binsbergen's argument only from the point of view of

Philosophy of Science. For that purpose I first try to locate the problems he raises within the range of issues addressed in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences. Van Binsbergen's criticism raises in particular two kinds of issues. First, the problem of the outsider gaining access to, or understanding of, the meaningful behaviour of others. Within this problem domain, van Binsbergen accuses ethnographers of naive empiricism (regarding the status of fieldwork data and regarding possible distortions in framing cultural data/experiences in academic formats and vocabularies). The second problem area concerns the theoretical framework of the interpreter her/himself. Within this problem domain, van Binsbergen accuses ethnographers of an uncritical attitude towards their own, North Atlantic knowledge practice and metaphysical assumptions. The first point relates directly to van Binsbergen's moral complaint about Anthropology, the second relates to the knowledge-political complaint concerning the hegemonic attitude of North-Atlantic academic paradigms.

In view of these problem domains, I ask the question whether the failings that van Binsbergen accuses ethnography of are necessarily part of the discipline (and should thus lead to abandoning it), or can be overcome by a more sophisticated practice of the discipline (and should thus lead to a repair operation). I am not concerned with the factual question of whether anthropologists sometimes, frequently, or even always commit the crimes indicated. After all, van Binsbergen's argument does not build on such a factual statement but on the principled one that ethnography is a misguided enterprise.

#### The possibility of a sophisticated cultural hermeneutics

The issues of understanding cultural others in Ethnography can be placed in the general chapter in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences concerned with the interpretation of thought and action, the chapter of Hermeneutics. Such questions of interpretation become especially urgent when it concerns interpretation across boundaries of time (as in the historical sciences) and culture (as in Anthropology). In how far, and with what methodological precautions, is such interpretation possible? In how far will our own vocabularies, agendas and paradigms always distort results? And can such interpretations of the foreign, the 'other', really challenge our own theoretical and metaphysical assumptions? These questions have been discussed in highly interesting work in Philosophy, the Theory of History, and in the Theory of Cultural Studies. From these discussions I will tap to assess van Binsbergen's argument.

A preliminary observation is necessary here. For interesting discussions of these fundamental methodological questions we have to turn to the philosophically more sophisticated discussions on the Social Sciences and History. Such discussions take seriously the fact that acting human beings, the objects of study, are themselves interpreting their own actions, and do so within a specific historical context of action. We cannot understand their action without grasping the interpretations that actors themselves have of their situation. This self-interpretation of social actors raises the issue of the 'double hermeneutics' involved in doing Social Science. The academic analyst interprets human action, but the action cannot be understood without, again, interpreting the self-interpretation of these actors. It does not suffice to explain human action from a purely third-person point of view, referring to objective factors such as calculable benefits, dangers, and possibilities in the situation. We need to trace how the actors themselves

perceived these benefits, dangers and possible courses of action. Thus, we have to recover the intentionality of the action, as we say in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences. Of course one can try to model human action and motivation, for instance by assuming that humans are use-maximalist or that they have a certain standard understanding of their world. This can often be a useful strategy for practical purposes and is used in much social science research, but it is a shortcut, avoiding the difficult issue of reconstructing people's life-world and motivations.

Motivations and interpretations of actors are not directly assessable by observation. That makes Social Science a difficult science. The work to be done is hermeneutics, the reconstruction of the meaning of the action or ideas concerned through understanding the context of meaning, the life-world of the actors and (in the case of individual actions) the specific intervention that the person under study intends to make. Different strategies of hermeneutics have been tried. A basic difference concerns, for instance, hermeneutics conceived of as empathy, as a psychological identification with the actors concerned, or hermeneutics conceived of as the reconstruction of contexts of meaning, as an almost linguistic exercise.

Anthropological fieldwork is a hermeneutical technique. The immersion in the other cultural context which is pursued creates a very low threshold for gaining understanding, and the participation in actual interaction provides "a unique function of validation", as van Binsbergen calls it, because the appropriateness of the interpretation is immediately put to test in actual social action and communication. (496). At the same time, van Binsbergen warns that it is naïve to assume that fieldwork therefore results in unproblematic and reliable data and interpretations. Despite anthropological techniques, the paradigms, assumptions and biases of the fieldworker who is coming from a different society cannot be blotted out. The questions of getting a good grasp of the data and of attaining sufficient fit of one's interpretations with the data are still on the agenda. The unavoidable constructive activity of the observer makes that the validity of the fieldwork results cannot be assumed. Van Binsbergen's conclusion is that, finally, validation "cannot be done without involving them", i.e. the actors.

I make two observations at this point. First I would note, contrary to van Binsbergen, that this kind of hermeneutics is not basically a moral issue. Trying to recover people's interpretations and swapping between the roles of participant and analyst (insider and outsider) is not wrong as such. The whole idea of studies across cultural boundaries can be viewed as an attempt to move, in some way, understanding of social or mental phenomena from cultural context A to context B (say from the Azande to Western Europe). This exercise may involve for the investigator playing different roles in A and B. But it is symmetrical in the sense that an investigator from context A would have to make similar moves, but then starting from the other side, when investigating cultural context B.

The hot issue in understanding across boundaries is the quality of the understanding, namely the issue how we can be sure that our interpretations actually fit the meanings of action and ideas of the actors themselves. In Historiography this problem of 'fit' appears for instance in the problem of 'anachronism'. We easily make sense of observations by projecting our own mode of understanding onto the data. Sometimes such an interpretation can clarify a range of other phenomena and thus seem a successful explanation. Nevertheless, it will still be deficient if the interpretation assumes on the part

of the actors information, understanding, concepts or motivations that they could not possibly have had. Just like historians applying anachronistic interpretations, investigators of culture may apply interpretations to cultural actors that they could not have shared.

Thus, the issue in studies of culture is if the interpretation finally produced by the analyst (in an academic language) can plausibly 'fit' with that of the actors. The historian Quentin Skinner provides a sophisticated discussion of this problem in his famous article "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas". Skinner notes that approaching the material with preconceived paradigms is both inescapable and dangerous. It is inescapable, for instance, because of the vantage point, and the linguistic, theoretical and problem contexts from which the observer engages in the research. There is, for instance, always a tendency to apply ones own familiar criteria of classification and discrimination. The observer "may 'see' something apparently ... familiar ... and may in consequence provide a misleading familiar-looking description" (45). Also, "the observer may unconsciously misuse his vantage point in describing the sense of the given work" (47).

According to Skinner, there may always be different interpretations rendering the facts, however, these should at least be compatible with what the meaning of the action could have been for the actor. Thus, there is a strong negative requirement, namely to "exclude the possibility that an acceptable account of an agent's behaviour could ever survive the demonstration that it was itself dependent on the use of criteria of description and classification not available to the agent himself". Notions, ideals and motivations etcetera that were not available in the context of action of the agent cannot have been part of his motivation. He states the positive equivalent of this requirement as: "any plausible account of what an agent meant must necessarily fall under, and make use of, the range of descriptions which the agent himself could at least in principle have applied to describe and classify what he was doing". This "in principle" is vital especially for the historical sciences. It cannot be more than a hypothetical test to what the motivations or views of the agent could at all have included.

In another formulation, Skinner states that: "no agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done." Interestingly, Skinners criterion for an acceptable interpretation gives the objects of research the right, in principle, to respond, to speak out. Although, like in the case of history, this is a hypothetical or virtual response, there is some 'speaking back'. Skinner seems to indicate here requirements for a hermeneutical approach that avoids the criticisms of naïve empiricism that van Binsbergen directs at Anthropology. This suggests that Anthropology can, at least in this respect, in principle be repaired. In Action Research approaches to Social Science this element of 'speaking back' of the agent, the check of the investigated actors, is given a central place.

The second problem domain in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences which van Binsbergen addresses is that of the status of North Atlantic theoretical and metaphysical frameworks. Van Binsbergen accuses Anthropology of uncritical acceptance of such frameworks. Again, my discussion is limited to the question if such uncritical acceptance is inherent in the discipline and again my conclusion is that with a more sophisticated hermeneutical approach the weaknesses of Anthropology may be repairable.



In order to present a more sophisticated version of Social Science, I refer to the interesting views of what may be called the father of modern hermeneutics, namely Hans-Georg Gadamer. In his view of hermeneutics, Social Science is necessarily a self-questioning tradition, a process of self-reflection, of attaining self-knowledge. At the same time, however, the specific historically and culturally situated character of Social Science knowledge is not something that can be overcome, because it is part of our human condition.

In Gadamer's view, any hermeneutics necessarily involves a "Vorverständnis" (a pre-understanding) by the interpreter of the object. Again, because this Vorverständnis changes over time (if only through the results of academic works of interpretation, but also because of cultural and political processes of change), hermeneutics is, finally, a never ending process. Hermeneutics throws light on the object of research in ever new ways, from an ever shifting starting position. Hermeneutics in this philosophical form is an exercise of always redefining our relation to the historically (or culturally) 'others'. In this sense, it is an indirect way of questioning ourselves, of attaining self-knowledge. The history of the anthropological study of "traditional systems of thought" may illustrate that Anthropology may learn something from Gadamer and that investigations in the Vorverständnis involved would have helped. One can think here, for instance, of Claude Lévy-Bruhl who analysed the difference between 'primitive' thought and science in terms of the mental make-up of the humans involved. Or of Evans Pritchard whose final assessment of the knowledge system of the Zande people, in his famous study *Whichcraft and Oracles among the Azande*, is that Zande thought is not based upon fact, as, supposedly, Western science is. Or of Robin Horton's assessment of indigenous knowledge systems as being 'closed', i.e. not aware of different knowledge systems and not exposed to a process of criticism, as supposedly Western science is. In its own hyperbolic way, this history of western theorizing tells more about shifting views of Anthropologists themselves than it tells about the others, the 'primitives'. Part of the implicit Vorverständnis is a constantly shifting conception about what Western thought or Western science is. From Lévy-Bruhls idea of western man with a scientific mental make-up, to Evans Pritchard's positivistic idea of science as based on fact and Horton's Popperian idea of science as critical rationality. It could be noted that subsequent developments in Science Studies, which stress the social construction of knowledge, again suggest different interpretations of the thought of cultural others.

This example confirms van Binsbergen accusation of anthropologists' uncritical acceptance of North-Atlantic paradigms. However, it also shows that a more critical, hermeneutical approach to Social Science that takes note of Gadamer's reflections upon hermeneutics would include a clearly self-reflective element. So again, my conclusion is that the failures that van Binsbergen indicates are not inherent in the discipline.

Anthropology may at first sight seem a one-sided process of subjecting others to ones interpretations, it seems possible, however, to practice a hermeneutically sophisticated Anthropology which involves both dialogical elements in advancing interpretations and a self-reflective attitude towards western paradigms.

## II. The Challenge of Intercultural Knowledge Production

The previous argument addresses van Binsbergen's conclusions as to Anthropology, however, it does not yet do justice to the broad and challenging problematic which he advances so forcefully, namely the future of intercultural knowledge construction. Even when we conclude that Anthropology as a discipline does not need to be discarded on methodological grounds, then it could still be valid to argue on other grounds that we need to advance to new forms of knowledge production which better fit the present globalised intercultural world. Van Binsbergen's effort to table the issue of the production of knowledge about culture (as well as his related attack on the idea of cultures as distinct units of analysis) is a very important one. On the one hand, in studies of culture we are still struggling with a complicated colonial heritage, and on the other hand contemporary processes of cultural globalization cry out for strengthening of the cultural impact ('cultural citizenship') of intellectuals in the South.

In van Binsbergen's account, the road towards truly intercultural knowledge production involves replacing Anthropology by Intercultural Philosophy, thus substituting a communicative knowledge practice that avoids asymmetries for a naively inductive and hegemonic one. This is a challenging, revolutionary project which raises question both about the knowledge practice that is deserted, namely Anthropology, and about the one adopted, namely Intercultural Philosophy. I will conclude my making a few remarks about both.

I would suggest that intercultural knowledge production today requires both Anthropology and Philosophy. Anthropology in sophisticated hermeneutical forms as illustrated above, but also Anthropology expanded. This need for expansion derives from a concern with the political economy of knowledge, rather than with epistemological, political and moral criticisms as raised by van Binsbergen. We have to raise questions about who produces knowledge, where, addressing what questions, and in the framework of which projects or objectives? From this point of view, anthropological studies should be conducted by both Northerners and Southerners, locating the studies both outside and within the North Atlantic and contributing with their studies to critical assessments of views held in their own cultural context. Such an expanded agenda for Anthropology involves what could be called a counter-Anthropology which may focus on the North Atlantic, or may be practiced by those from outside the North Atlantic. As such this is not so new. Studying pockets of Western societies with anthropological methods, even anthropological studies of scientific research communities, are already done, and contribute much to a more realistic understanding of the West and of science. The importance of a focus on the political economy of knowledge production is that a renewed and truly intercultural knowledge production cannot be expected without addressing the incredible global imbalances, in terms of dominance of western paradigms as well as in more material terms of who produces knowledge and discourses, where and in what social and cultural environments. With almost all centres of knowledge production located in the North Atlantic, the cultural biases observed by van Binsbergen in Anthropology may simply be repeated in the new discipline of Intercultural Philosophy.

With a more sophisticated anthropological practice as a first leg of intercultural knowledge production, and counter-anthropologies as the second, then Intercultural Philosophy may be the third. But what is this thing Intercultural Philosophy?

For van Binsbergen, the basic attraction of Intercultural Philosophy is that it is basically a communicative, dialogical form of knowledge production. It does not involve the model of the subject gaining knowledge about the object. Philosophy seems to be based upon interaction and equality. Such statements about Philosophy tend to be highly idealistic, as if suddenly power-free communication reigns if we pretend to be philosophers, and as if we can rise above the violence, commercial interest and manipulations which shape the world of discourse and power. To seek the advantages of Intercultural Philosophy in that direction would certainly be mistaken. However, Philosophy is a different form of discourse from the Social Sciences, where reflexivity about such methodological problems as related to acquiring knowledge and representation of knowledge in the framework of theories (van Binsbergen's two basic methodological criticisms of Anthropology) receive all attention. Furthermore, the basic form of interaction in Philosophy is discussion, which may facilitate better the dealing with knowledge-political issues. Hegemonic positions and cultural biases, which certainly will always be there, will more easily be challenged in Philosophy.

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Two questions relating to Intercultural Philosophy remain unaddressed by van Binsbergen. First of all, it remains unclear how the Intercultural Philosophy can include empirical studies, Philosophy being that addresses presuppositions as well as consequences of empirical studies, but not an empirical discipline itself.. Second, van Binsbergen did not explain why a new type of Philosophy, Intercultural Philosophy, should be invented to be the vehicle of intercultural knowledge production. Given his own argument that "Cultures do not exist", it does not seem to make sense to speak of intercultural relations as if cultures exist, after all, are identifiable units. Rather, we would need regular Philosophy sensitized to addressing issues of cultural difference.

## Conclusion

The assessment of van Binsbergen's argument in this paper suggests some diversion from his own conclusion. His epistemological, knowledge-political and moral arguments do not force us to discard Anthropology all together. Rather, a hermeneutically more sophisticated and self-reflexive Anthropology is called for. At the same time, van Binsbergen's greater objective of establishing a truly intercultural knowledge production can itself be strengthened by considerations about the political economy of knowledge production. Intercultural knowledge production requires that the actual production of cultural knowledge is democratized and 'decentered' all over the globe. This is a necessary basis for counter discourses and for a challenging Anthropology, or counter-Anthropology. Finally, it remains unclear in van Binsbergen's argument in how far Intercultural Philosophy can actually do the job and also include empirical study of culture. The argument in this article suggests that a much greater role of Philosophy (Intercultural Philosophy if you like) is called for in intercultural knowledge production. Firstly in order to put conceptual, theoretical and methodological issues much more in the forefront of discussions than is presently the case, and secondly in order to foster communicative modes of knowledge which can make knowledge production about culture itself an intercultural exercise.

